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James A. Haught

Date Jan. 10, 2003

(CHECK ONE CATEGORY ONLY)

For outstanding investigative reporting in:

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Television

- ☐ Network or syndicated program
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(CHECK ENTRY FEE)

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- ☒ \$50 entry fee (Current IRE Member)
☐ Free entry (Current Student Member)

Name of member involved in entered work:

Eric Eyre and Scott Finn

Nonmember

- ☐ \$100 entry fee (Non-IRE Member)
☐ \$25 entry fee (Non-IRE Student Member)

If checking nonmember entry, designate the contributing individual who will receive one-year membership. Provide all contact information: (Please type or print clearly)

Name: _____

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To be completed by person submitting the entry. (Please type or print clearly):

Contact person: Jim Haught News organization: Editor, Charleston Gazette

Mailing address: 1001 Virginia St. E, Charleston, WV 25301

Phone number: 304-348-5199 Fax number: 304-348-1233 E-mail: haught@wvgazette.com

Title of Entry: "The Long Haul"/"Broken Promises" Length (time) of radio or TV entry _____

Reporters involved in effort: List contributors in the order they should appear on the plaque for certificates. If this entry is named a winner, only those people listed will be entered into our official records. Check the box next to the contributor if he or she is a current IRE member.

	Name	Title	Member
1.	Eric Eyre	reporter	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
2.	Scott Finn	reporter	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
3.			<input type="checkbox"/>
4.			<input type="checkbox"/>
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**IRE Awards 2002
Questionnaire**

Eric Eyre and Scott Finn
Charleston Gazette

1. Title of series

"The Long Haul" / "Broken Promises"

2. Dates published

August 25 & September 29, 2002

3. Topic and synopsis of series, including major findings

During the past decade, school officials in West Virginia closed one of every five schools in a massive consolidation drive.

Parents in rural areas said their children were being forced to ride the bus for hours every day because of the closings. They also said their children never received the advanced courses they were promised in the new, consolidated schools.

School officials denied the claims, and said the school closings were necessary because they saved millions of dollars each year. Each side presented anecdotal evidence to back themselves up.

Gazette reporters Scott Finn and Eric Eyre decided to test each side's claims. In their first installment, "The Long Haul," they revealed:

- The number of children who have to ride the bus more than two hours every day doubled during the 1990s.
- Statewide, more than 36,000 rural children rode the bus for longer than state guidelines allow. More than two-thirds of bus routes carrying elementary students exceeded guidelines.
- School administrators ignored a 1998 law that required them to study the amount of time students spend on buses. They also didn't follow laws that require them to determine how a proposed school closing might increase bus times for students.
- Long bus rides hurt children's academic performance, kept them out of sports and other activities and harmed their health.

In their second installment, "Broken Promises," they found:

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- The advanced classes promised to high school students after a school consolidation often never materialized. For example, administrators committed to new 12 Advanced Placement courses when three schools merged into Spring Valley High School. Today, the school has no AP classes.
 - State officials failed to track whether their school closing campaign saved the millions of dollars they promised. They aborted a study that was half complete for no apparent reason.
 - Despite a 13 percent drop in student enrollment during the 1990s, the state had more school administrators than ever before.

4. *How the story got started*

(see question #3)

5. *Major types of documents used and if FOI requests were needed*

- 1,569 bus run logs - obtained through state FOI requests to 35 counties
- 1992 and 1996 survey of county transportation directors - through state FOIA
- West Virginia House of Delegates bill requesting transportation study
- Bid request for transportation study and bid evaluation documents - through state FOIA
- MGT of America consultant report - 1999 - through state FOIA
- 1992 State Board of Education resolution on student travel times - through state FOIA
- 47 school closing documents - through state FOIA (the state already had shredded 300 other closing documents we requested)
- Three academic studies of health effects of long bus rides
- Several other academic studies about bus times
- West Virginia school transportation policies and regulations - through state FOIA
- School Building Authority project evaluation criteria and score sheets - through state FOIA
- Depositions and transcripts from lawsuit: Pendleton County vs. West Virginia School Building Authority
- Personnel totals and salaries from state Dept. of Education for 1990s - through state FOIA
- Presentation to state Legislature by School Building Authority
- Course schedules for every state high school - through state FOIA
- Advanced Placement enrollment data - through state FOIA

6. *Major types of human sources used*

- Parents and students
- County school administrators
- Teachers
- County transportation directors and bus drivers
- State school officials

- Academic experts
- School architects
- Lawmakers

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7. Results

Within one month of the publication of "The Long Haul," state school officials:

- Launched a statewide study of how long children are riding the bus to school
- Began to develop a new computerized system for tracking every bus ride in the state
- Changed a decade-old policy to give more weight to how long children ride the bus when considering whether to close a school

Within one month of the publication of "Broken Promises," state school officials:

- Admitted for the first time there were no hard savings from the massive consolidation of the 1990s
- Ordered a study of administrative personnel in state education
- Prodded county administrators to offer more advanced high school courses

8. *Follow-up. Have you run a correction or clarification on the report or has anyone come forward to challenge its accuracy? If so, please explain.*

No.

9. Advice to other journalists planning a similar project

Although it was difficult to create our own database, it gave us a much deeper understanding of the issue. We used the database to tell us where some of the longest bus rides were, and then interviewed the students on those buses.

Don't rely on official studies and analysis. We discovered that so-called "facts" given by state school officials often were wrong. For example, school officials said for years that they were cutting the number of administrators, but in fact they were increasing their ranks.

Also, don't just talk about long bus rides. Experience them. Our best stories were about what kids actually do on the bus rides, like play "Mercy" and count the bolts in the ceiling.

10. Difficulty, uniqueness of effort, or other special circumstances related to this project

Because state officials ignored a law requiring them to study bus times, we had to construct our own database of 1,569 bus runs.

Through the state's Freedom of Information Act, we asked for bus records for the state's 35 most rural counties. Several county administrators denied our first request. Some said the records contained private information, so we asked them to redact children's names. Others

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wanted to charge us large sums for copying. We only had to pay one county more than \$20. Two counties required us to travel up to three hours to their headquarter to view the data.

Many of the bus records were handwritten, and others were typed out. The data entry took more than eight months, squeezed in between the demands of a daily beat. (see accompanying Uplink article.)

Also, we requested more than 300 school closing records for the last 10 years - the documents county administrators are required to complete before closing a school. But the state had shredded all but 47 of those documents.

Midway through the project, Eric Eyre received a fellowship from the University of Maryland that allowed him to work on the project full-time for six months, speeding its completion.

11. Length of time taken to report, write and edit the story

18 months

12. If you extensively used computer-assisted reporting skills, please answer the following:

a. Did you obtain or build any electronic databases? If you obtained data, what is its name and source? What was the cost? If you created your own database, what records did you use?

We built our own database of 1,569 bus runs, using handwritten and typed bus logs.

b. Did you extensively use any Internet sources? If so, please list addresses and explain how each site was useful.

Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC): <http://www.eric.ed.gov/> - academic studies of school consolidation

Rural School and Community Trust: <http://www.ruraledu.org/> - experts on rural education

West Virginia Department of Education data: <http://wvde.state.wv.us/data/> - information on spending, policies, personnel, etc.

West Virginia School Building Authority: <http://www.state.wv.us/wvsba/default.htm> - information on school spending

c. What specific software did you use?

Microsoft Excel

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d. Did you have difficulties obtaining the electronic information you used? How did you resolve this? Did you use FOIA for the data under state or federal law?

We obtained electronic databases of state and county education employees through state FOI laws.

e. Did you have any difficulties with the data itself? How did you overcome them?

Sometimes it was difficult from the bus logs to determine when the ride began and when it ended.

We checked our results with transportation directors in all 35 counties, both through phone calls and by sending a copy of their county's data to them through the mail.

We made corrections to the database based on their responses. In some cases, we spent half an hour going over a particularly complicated bus schedule with a transportation director.

f. Was any analysis done? If so, what?

The bus runs represented the longest possible time a child might ride a bus. The run began when the first person stepped on the bus, and ended when the children were dropped off at an elementary, middle or high school.

The bus run times did not include the time children stand waiting for the bus to arrive. They were ideal times, not taking into account bad weather or traffic problems.

To determine the length of each bus run, we subtracted the start time from the drop-off time. We then used Excel's "count if" feature to count only the runs that exceeded state guidelines. We divided that by the total count to determine the percent of runs over guidelines.

The average student's bus ride could not be tabulated for most counties, because they don't track when individual children board their bus. Clay County was one of the few that tracks exactly when each child boards the bus and when they are dropped off.

Because of this, we were able to determine that the average Clay Elementary student spent 37 minutes on the bus, more than the state guideline of 30 minutes.

g. Was data analysis done by your own staff or was outside assistance used? Who?

We entered the data ourselves over the course of eight months.

the ^{Charleston} **Gazette**
The State Newspaper

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1001 Virginia St., East
Charleston, W. Va. 25301

Jan. 7, 2003

2002 IRE Contest
138 Neff Annex
Missouri School of Journalism
Columbia, MO 65211

To the judges,

In Pocahontas County, W. Va., a mother dresses her 4-year-old son in his sleep to give him a few extra minutes of rest before his hour and 20-minute ride to school.

Teachers in neighboring Webster County slip cups of coffee to red-eyed high school students to help them stay awake in class after marathon bus rides.

And an 8-year-old boy in rural Ritchie County worries he'll fall asleep on the bus and no one will wake him after his 70-minute trip to school. His ride time quadrupled this fall because his local elementary school was shut down.

During the 1990s, state school administrators pushed a massive consolidation plan. They shut down 300 schools, mostly in poor, rural communities. The resulting increase in student travel times was something state officials tried to keep quiet.

In a special report, "The Long Haul," Charleston Gazette reporters Eric Eyre and Scott Finn revealed that school administrators across the state repeatedly ignored transportation laws and guidelines, forcing thousands of West Virginia children to spend two hours or more a day on school buses.

Eyre and Finn conducted an exhaustive investigation into the burden that school closing have placed on West Virginia's rural children. They interviewed more than 80 people and reviewed thousands of pages of documents obtained under the West Virginia Freedom of Information Act. The reporters also gathered more than 1,500 records of bus runs in rural counties, many handwritten, and entered them into a database they constructed (see attached article from Uplink magazine).

Among the Gazette reporters' findings:

| More than half of all bus routes in rural West Virginia exceeded state guidelines. The guidelines say no elementary student should be on a bus more than 30 minutes each way, no middle school student should have more than a 45-minute ride, and no high school student should face more than an hour on a bus one-way.

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[The number of children across the state who are riding the bus more than two hours a day doubled during the 1990s, even as West Virginia's number of students declined greatly.

[State and county administrators ignored a 1998 law that required them to study the amount of time students spend on buses.

The Gazette's reporting prompted numerous reforms designed to shorten bus rides for rural children. For the first time in six years, state education leaders directed county school boards to report how much time children spend on buses. State officials also announced plans to set up a computerized transportation system to track every bus ride in the state.

In September, citing the Gazette's report, state officials also changed a decade-old policy and agreed to give more weight to student travel times when providing funds for school construction.

In a subsequent investigative report on school closings, "Broken Promises," Eyre and Finn revealed that school administrators didn't provide students with advanced classes nor save taxpayers millions of dollars through personnel cuts as they promised a decade ago.

Despite a drop in enrollment of more than 40,000 students, there were actually more school administrators in the state than there were in 1990, the Gazette reporters discovered. Most were central office administrators who don't work directly with children. The state Department of Education also bolstered its administrative ranks.

In response, state school officials, for the first time, admitted there were no hard savings from the massive consolidation campaign of the 1990s. State schools Superintendent David Stewart ordered a study of administrative personnel across the state. He also vowed to cut employees in his department this year. And he prodded counties to offer more Advanced Placement courses.

We're pleased to nominate "The Long Haul" and "Broken Promises" for a 2002 IRE Award.

Sincerely,



James Haught
Editor

Closing
Costs

School consolidation
in West Virginia

PART 1: THE LONG HAUL

August 25, 2002

Charleston Gazette

STORY BY ERIC EYRE & SCOTT FINN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY F. BRIAN FERGUSON

School closings. lax oversight lead to record long bus rides

SCHOOL administrators across West Virginia have repeatedly ignored transportation laws and guidelines, forcing thousands of children to spend two hours or more on school buses each day and leaving them more likely to get sick, less likely to learn, a Gazette-Mail investigation has found.

The number of children who ride buses more than two hours a day doubled during the 1990s, even though 25,000 fewer children ride buses, records show.

In Pocahontas County, elementary school children count bolts on the roof of Bus No. 21 to amuse themselves during their hour and 40-minute ride.

In Webster County, teachers slip cups of coffee to red-eyed

students to help them stay awake.

In Ritchie County, an 8-year-old boy worries that he'll fall asleep on the bus and no one will wake him. His ride time quadruples this fall because his local elementary school in Cairo was shut down.

When schools open across the state Monday, more than half of all bus routes in rural West Virginia will exceed what the state calls "reasonable" under its guidelines, according to a Gazette-Mail analysis of 1,500 bus runs in 35 rural counties.

The bus times will get only longer with 153 schools expected to close within the next eight years.

"They're turning these children into little commuters," said Ed Haver, who serves on

the West Virginia Coalition for Physical Activity and directs the cardiac rehabilitation program at Charleston Area Medical Center. "It's sad for kids so young to be caught up in that."

The newspaper's investigation found soaring transportation costs, longer bus rides for the state's youngest children and school officials who refuse to monitor the problem.

▲ More than two-thirds of elementary bus runs, almost 60 percent of middle school routes and a third of high school runs in rural counties exceed state guidelines — less than 30 minutes each way for elementary students, 45 minutes for middle school children, and an hour for high school students.

▲ Statewide, at least 20,000 elementary students, 11,000

middle school students and 5,000 high school students endure rides over the state guidelines, according to a survey of transportation directors obtained by the Gazette-Mail.

▲ The longest one-way bus ride in West Virginia: exactly two hours for a high school student in Monroe County.

▲ State and county school administrators ignored a 1998 law that required them to study the amount of time students spend on buses. They ignored a consultant's recommendation to monitor student bus times every year. They also failed to comply with laws that require them to determine projected bus times when schools consolidate.

▲ West Virginia spends more of its education dollars on transportation than any other

er state, draining money from teachers and classrooms. The long rides prompt counties to hire more bus drivers and slash the jobs of classroom aides, secretaries, custodians and cooks. Transportation costs on a per-pupil basis have doubled in the last decade for 11 counties.

Students with long rides say they are stressed and exhausted. Their grades slump. They participate in fewer after-school activities. They have less time to spend with their parents.

Long bus rides also are bad for children's health, recent studies have shown. Students who spend hours in the morning and afternoon slumped in bus seats are more likely to develop respiratory illnesses. The diesel exhaust they inhale sticks in their young, developing lungs.

Thousands of West Virginia children spend more time riding to school than adults driving to work. The average American has a 26-minute commute. Los Angeles residents spend 28 minutes commuting to work.

"No adult would want to commute that far for 12 years, especially on winding, bad roads," said Belle Zars, an independent researcher who completed a national busing study in 1998. "It's one thing if you're in a Lexus, quite another thing if you're climbing into a hot, stinking bus."

Presented with the Gazette-Mail findings, state schools Transportation Director Wayne

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RIDE

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Clutter said he will establish a computerized reporting system to track bus routes and times statewide.

"I promise you that's going to be worked on," Clutter said. "We're going to get some technology in the transportation department. We're going to work on this for every bus run in the state. We need to get accurate and timely data."

Clutter also announced plans to survey counties this fall to determine how many students ride buses longer than guidelines recommend. Transportation directors haven't reported bus times to the Department of Education since 1996. More than 70 schools have closed since then.

"I want to see where we are now. Absolutely. We need that data in here," Clutter said.

Fewer schools, rough terrain

West Virginia school buses rumble up 4,000-foot mountains in Pocahontas County. They skirt under hanging rock formations in Webster County. They cross covered bridges in Barbour County. They shuttle 220,000 kids over 42,600 miles of blacktop, gravel, "tar and chip," and dirt roads each year.

Indeed, the buses traverse some of the toughest terrain in the nation.

And for years, former state schools Superintendent Hank Marockie and state Department of Education officials blamed long bus rides on West Virginia's topography.

"School consolidation is not the primary cause of the majority of the longer transportation times," former Transportation Director Cecil Dolan wrote in a 1992 memo to Marockie.

"These routes have existed for years and will likely continue to exist due to West Virginia's topography and highway network. These are the controlling factors in long transportation times for a small percentage of students, not school consolidation."

The mountains and hollows haven't changed over the past decade. The roads have gotten better. There are fewer students to bus.

Yet between 1992 and 1996, the number of students with hour-long rides increased from 3,908 to 7,938, according to two surveys of county transportation directors.

In 1992, 13 counties had more

than 100 students riding school buses for more than an hour each way. Four years later, 21 counties fell into that category.

Why the increase?

"I have no explanation for that," said Clutter, after examining the data presented by the Gazette-Mail. "Is it consolidation? Yes, consolidation is a factor. I'll say that."

County school boards, with the state Board of Education's approval, closed more than 300 schools since 1990 — one of every five West Virginia schools.

They plan to shut down another 153 schools by 2010, most of them elementary schools.

State School Building Authority Executive Director Clacy Williams, perhaps the state's most vocal consolidation proponent, acknowledged that consolidation has played a role in bus time hikes.

"Generally, kids are spending a little more time on buses," said Williams, whose agency often gets blamed for spurring consolidation. "But you don't have to be in a rural area for that to be a reality."

Stormy's ride

Eight-year-old Mason "Stormy" Platt will experience the sting of consolidation this fall.

The Ritchie County Board of Education closed his school, Cairo Elementary, in June. He's been assigned to Harrisville Elementary, 18 miles away.

Platt's bus ride will jump from a 13-minute jaunt down the road to a 66-minute endurance ride, Ritchie County records show.

He remains uneasy about attending the new school.

"What worries Stormy, he's afraid he'll fall asleep on the bus and they will forget him," said Sue Cain, the boy's grandmother. "He keeps asking, 'Grandma, what if I fall asleep?'"

Elementary students are supposed to spend less time on the bus than older students.

In a 1990 resolution, the state Board of Education declared that it would consider "more favorably" school closing proposals that result in longer bus rides for middle school and high school students.

"However," the resolution states, "[the board] will review very carefully proposals which involve additional transportation time for younger students, that is, early childhood, primary or elementary age, in order to determine the potential impact on students and whether consolidation is reasonable and practical."

But today, buses hauling elementary children are on the road

almost as long as those carrying high school students, according to the Gazette-Mail analysis.

The average elementary run is 41 minutes; the average high school route, 54 minutes.

Elementary children ride the bus more than an hour each way on more than 300 bus routes in 34 of the state's 35 most rural counties.

The elementary times are longest in counties, such as Ritchie, with only one high school, the bus route analysis shows.

Nine of the 10 counties with the longest bus runs for elementary children have just one high school. In the 10 counties with the shortest elementary runs, only two are one-high-school counties.

In a county with just one high school, buses that used to carry elementary students must be devoted to older students. Bus times increase for everyone.

Now that Cairo Elementary has closed, bus times are expected to increase for 56 of Cairo's 70 students, from an average of 22 minutes to 38 minutes each way.

"Those preschoolers are going to be peeing on the bus," said Cain, rubbing her grandson's close-cropped blond hair. "Somebody's going to have a messy bus to clean up."

As of last week, Cairo parents still hadn't received a bus schedule for the upcoming school year.

"They didn't give us time to prepare," Cain said. "Everything was kept secret. If they can mess up somebody's life, they'll mess it up."

Coffee cups and sleeping pills

This was the promise: Let us close your high school, and we'll furnish you with a tour bus, a Greyhound-type motor coach, complete with reclining seats, headrests and a bathroom. Yes, the ride will be long, but your children can travel in comfort and style.

That was 30 years ago. Hacker Valley parents and students are still waiting for that motor coach.

"Instead, we got a regular old school bus," said Janet Cogar, whose 16-year-old son attends Webster County High. "They made promises they couldn't keep."

Today, more than half of Webster County's high school bus runs exceed state guidelines.

Monica Shaffer, 15, who lives in Replete, rides an hour and 10 minutes to school.

She admits she's often "cranky." She's learned to sleep

in short bursts but has trouble sleeping through the night.

She blames the long bus ride. Her doctor prescribed sleeping pills.

"They had to get me those pills," Shaffer said while eating lunch recently with friends at Kathy's Restaurant in Hacker Valley. "I get so stressed out."

Mary Anderson, a 17-year-old senior at Webster County High, said her grades dropped from As and Bs at Hacker Valley School to Bs and Cs at the high school.

The girls struggle to stay awake during the last class period. They drink Coke and Mountain Dew. Sometimes teachers will prepare them a cup of coffee to help them stay alert.

"We usually drink so much caffeine, we don't sleep in the evening," Anderson said.

For Webster County kids, the rides are rough. Kids are shaken and bumped on the rides. There are mountains to cross on the way to school.

"You slam into each other," Anderson said. "You butt your head into the window or fall into the aisle. There's no room for our legs. Sometimes I wake up and Monica's head is on my shoulder."

The new bus driver refuses to pull over when someone gets sick, the girls said.

"Our old bus driver would just take a hose and spray it out of the bus," Anderson said. "Our new driver makes such a deal."

Hacker Valley parents attend few Parent-Teacher Organization meetings at Webster County High School. They're lucky to stop at the school more than three times a year.

At the elementary school, parents volunteer every day. Hacker Valley was one of about 35 elementary schools that received the state's exemplary rating last year.

"Hacker Valley parents can't afford to drive to the high school," Cogar said.

The Hacker Valley and Replete students attend few school dances, football and basketball games.

Lorena Quinn plays on the junior varsity basketball team. Anderson and Shaffer help Quinn with her homework on the bus while she sleeps.

"She's really been whupped a couple of times," Shaffer said. "If we don't help her, she won't get it done."

Shaffer's mother, Gloria, just wants to see her daughter more often during the school year. "She gets home, feeds the dogs, eats supper, goes to bed."

"I've got three more years to suffer," Shaffer said.

'I have no explanation for that'

No one at the county, state or federal level keeps track of how long kids ride the bus.

State legislators have tried, unsuccessfully, to force the West Virginia Department of Education to find out.

In 1998, the Legislature passed a law that mandated a study of 10 school transportation issues, including "amount of time students spend on buses."

But the bus time stipulation was left out when the Department of Education requested bids from consultants for the study, according to bid documents obtained by the Gazette-Mail. The other nine items were listed.

"I have no explanation for that," said Clutter, the state Department of Education's transportation director. "I can assure you it was not intentionally done."

Clutter said employees in the transportation department prepared the bid request. He reviewed the document, as did the Department of Education's lawyer, former Superintendent Marockie and current schools Superintendent David Stewart, who served as an assistant superintendent over Clutter at the time.

A Rockville, Md., consulting company looked at the original law and offered to examine bus times in its proposal, along with the other nine items. That consultant wasn't selected. Evaluators said the company's proposed study was too costly.

The state wound up paying MGT of America, a Florida company, \$175,000 to complete the transportation study. The company delivered a 104-page report with 70 recommendations in Jan. 1999.

Recommendation No. 6.12: "Direct county schools to collect and report student time on bus every year."

"Student time on bus has been a continuing concern," the report went on. "But counties do not regularly collect and report this critical information on a systematic basis."

The company's team leader, Julio Massad, stood by the recommendation in a recent interview.

"You want students to be fresh," said Massad, a former school principal who now works for a consulting firm in Austin, Texas. "You don't want them tired and hungry and not focused after a very long trip on the bus. It makes it hard for them to be ready to learn."

Short rides don't come cheap

You will find tough terrain — mountains, hollows, ridges — in rural Boone County. You won't find long bus rides.

Not for elementary school students. Not for middle school students. Not for high school students.

"The biggest reason we have shorter times is the fact we haven't consolidated schools," said Steve Bradley, Boone transportation director.

Boone County has three high schools near the county's three

largest communities. The county also has 14 elementary schools.

"With three high schools, 30 minutes is a long way from school," Bradley said.

Bus drivers pick up middle and high school students early in the morning, drop them off at school, then make a second run for elementary school children.

No high school students ride for more than an hour each way. No elementary children ride with middle and high school students.

The county hires six to eight contract drivers each year to haul students out of "tough spots" — mountainous areas that would increase times for students if they were picked up by 72-passenger buses.

The longest ride for children in Boone County is 55 minutes.

The short rides don't come cheap. Boone County transportation costs on a per-pupil basis have doubled over the past decade.

Boone County taxpayers support a 100-percent excess levy that allows the county to hire more service workers, including bus drivers, than the state provides under its school funding formula.

"In Boone County, there could be more money saved if more drivers were cut," said Joe Tagliente, a former middle school principal who served 11 years as Boone County transportation director before retiring in 2000. "But they have the money to support them."

Tagliente, who developed the county's route system, takes pride in the short hauls.

"If Boone County started to consolidate, you're going to get longer rides," Tagliente said. "If they keep the three high schools, then transportation times will never be long."

Ignoring state law

Each time county school administrators attempt to close a school, they must analyze student bus times. State law requires it. The state Department of Education mandates it.

State school board members receive copies of documents and approve the county school boards' decisions to shut down schools based on that information.

But after reviewing a sampling of 47 school closing documents, the Gazette-Mail found that school officials failed to comply with the law in one-third of the consolidations:

▲ Five times, counties stated that no elementary students would ride buses for more than "35 to 45 minutes," using a violation of state transportation guidelines to justify closing schools. The documents didn't declare the number of students with longer rides.

▲ Three counties provided the

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number of additional students who would ride buses and the expected increase in costs but no times.

▲ In two school closure documents, Monongalia and Logan counties provided no transportation times whatsoever.

Clutter acknowledged that some counties submitted incomplete school closing documents.

"I'm surprised those got past the state board," Clutter said.

He said the reviews became more thorough last year. The department's attorney now examines the documents.

"The process evolved," Clutter said. "The earlier ones aren't as good as the later ones in terms of the quality of the documents. A lot of it was a reaction to certain [court] cases."

"We have gotten more thorough with that. If they do not include the minutes, we [now] ask them to."

Clutter also acknowledged that counties don't examine the increase in bus times for elementary students when they close high schools.

"We never monitored that," he said. "We're probably going to ask them that now."

The Gazette-Mail attempted to review closure documents for the more than 300 schools closed since 1990, but the state Department of Education had retained only 47.

The department shredded the remaining documents, records show, Clutter said the agency

routinely destroys records older than three years.

A stacked deck

When former Gov. Gaston Caperton and state legislators established the School Building Authority in 1989, they never decided that bigger schools were more important than keeping reasonable bus times for students.

But when evaluating project proposals, the SBA gives more weight to some factors, such as larger schools that meet "economies of scale," and less weight to others, such as those that prompt bus time increases.

The Legislature set seven goals for judging which projects would receive money: student health and safety, economies of scale, reasonable travel times, multi-county schools, curricular improvements, educational innovations and adequate space. Legislators never ranked the goals.

But the SBA decided that safety, larger schools, curriculum and innovations were more important than bus times, classroom space and schools that accepted students from more than one county. The SBA also added an eighth "overall rating" goal into the mix.

The decision contradicted a 1990 state Board of Education resolution about school consolidation. State board members listed "avoids inappropriate increases in travel time" as the second priority when closing schools. They ranked "improved educational programs" as most important.

A project review team, made up of a Department of Education

administrator and eight educators from throughout the state, rates projects based on the criteria and submits a final score to SBA members.

The review process, small schools activists say, stacks the deck in favor of larger schools and longer bus rides.

SBA Executive Director Clacy Williams said the agency approved the weighted scale when money was limited and schools were in deplorable condition. He said children were in "dangerous situations."

"At the time the values were assigned, the most significant issue was to take care of health and safety problems and deliver a thorough and efficient education," Williams said. "[State law] doesn't say a thorough and efficient education in your back yard."

Last week, Williams said he would recommend — possibly as early as September — that the SBA remove the weighted scale from the evaluation process. Everything would receive equal consideration.

"It might be fun to take the argument away," Williams said. "We could eliminate the indexes on all of them. Our board may want to change that one of these days."

But Williams predicted the change wouldn't make a big difference, since SBA board members also consider Williams' final recommendation, inspection reports and statements from county school officials before distributing money for school projects.

Please See RIDE, Page 6C



Monica Shaffer, 15, and her mother Gloria wait for three hours every day outside Webster County High School so that brother Raymond can attend football practice. Monica says teachers slip students coffee in the morning so they don't fall asleep in class.

To calculate a final score for projects, the SBA review team uses a form that gives higher scores to projects that force longer bus rides on children.

Presented with the form, Williams was at first confused by the scoring, but said review team members wouldn't make the same mistake.

"No, we sit down with the team to explain this. I only do this once a year. We only use the form one day a year."

The infinite ride

West Virginia's bus time guidelines are meaningless if they aren't enforced, school transportation experts say.

In other states, bus time limits are set in state law or policy, not mere recommendations. Tennessee, for instance, sets a 90-minute one-way limit on bus trips for all students.

"There has to be some standard, that at about this level we don't want the kids on the bus," said Massad, who delivered the report on West Virginia school transportation three years ago. "You set standards, then you maintain and collect data on a periodic basis. It's a way of gauging whether you're on target with your policy."

The West Virginia Office of Education Performance Audits, which monitors schools, has never cited a county school system for exceeding the state transportation guidelines.

The reason: The guidelines are just that, guidelines. There's no law, policy, or standard about travel times in West Virginia.

"The times are too idealistic," Clutter said. "It gives people false hope."

Rural school transportation directors want the guidelines scrapped.

"It's not realistic in rural counties," said Jerry Milliken, an assistant superintendent in Roane County, where 38 out of 42 elementary runs exceed guidelines. "Even if they get in their private vehicle they can't drive it in that."

Small schools advocates want the guidelines set into law. They want them enforced. West Virginia last had maximum bus times set in policy in 1992.

If maximum bus times were enforced, several small rural schools now on the chopping block might be kept open.

"If schools keep closing, the rides are going to go up," said Zans, the independent researcher who also worked four years as a West Virginia University Extension agent in Logan County.

"Long bus rides are a place of endurance, not learning. You can't keep saying children are going to have to take an infinite ride."

To contact staff writers Eric Eyre and Scott Finn, use e-mail or call 357-4323.

A bus makes the evening run along Sinclair Ridge in Preston County. During the last decade, the number of West Virginia children on the bus for more than two hours a day doubled.

Counting bolts: Tommy's long ride

By Eric Eyre and Scott Finn
gazette@wvgazette.com

SNOWSHOE — Tommy Evans stood atop the 4,848-foot mountain at 6:20 a.m., waiting for the bus to arrive, wearing a special badge so nobody would lose him on the way to school.

He clutched his father's hand. Wind sailed through the pine boughs. Their dog, Jake, sniffed a trash can.

Tommy is learning the hard truth about rural education at an early age. He's 4 years old. He attended preschool at the elementary school in Marlinton. He starts kindergarten Monday.

He travels 1 hour and 20 minutes each way to and from school. He rides

two buses, transferring at Slayfork. He leaves at 6:30, returns home at 4:40 in the afternoon.

It's hard on him, hard on any kid," said Tommy's father, Tom Evans, who works in the Snowshoe bike shop.

Tommy's mother, Joan, joined them at the top of the mountain. She put her arm around Tommy's shoulder, made sure he had gone to the bathroom.

Tommy hadn't eaten breakfast. It was too early. He wasn't hungry yet.

"When we came here we didn't have Tommy," Tom Evans said. "We didn't realize what was involved. If and when we move from this mountain, it will be because of the long bus rides."

Please See TOMMY, Page 6C



TOMMY

Continued From Page 1C

A strobe light pierced the fog. A yellow bus rumbled up the mountain.

Tommy climbed on, slumped into his seat, waved out the window. His father and mother waved back, blew him kisses, as the bus coasted down the mountain, Tommy already fast asleep.

The Snowshoe kids are so tired

Parents in northern Pocahontas County want a new school. They want a community school where their kids could ride their bikes and study forests, streams and wildlife.

Intrawest, the company that owns Snowshoe Mountain Resort, offered to donate land for the new school. Snowshoe officials said they couldn't recruit employees with children because of long bus rides.

Volunteers got in line. They invited nearby Randolph County children to come to the school. Construction money would come from the state School Building Authority.

The proposed 90-student school didn't meet the SBA's "economies of scale" guidelines, which require new schools to house at least 300 students. But SBA officials said they would consider the school because it would promote economic development and serve children from two counties.

"I can't think of a better way to serve kids than to keep them close to home," said SBA Executive Director Clacy Williams last year.

"If you ride this two times a day, five days a week, man, it gets old real fast. As soon as I get home, I eat, drink, do my homework, go to bed, I don't have time for anything else."

Seth Morgan, 8, Marlinton Elementary second-grader

But the school plans fizzled. Randolph County didn't want to send its kids. School systems receive state money based on enrollment. Fewer kids means fewer dollars.

So, for now, and perhaps for a lifetime, Pocahontas County children must endure long school bus rides. That's all they'll know.

"When they leave it's dark. When they get home, it's dark," said Regina Erlwine, whose 4-year-old son and 6-year-old daughter ride the bus to Marlinton.

Regina must put her children to bed early, about 7 p.m. She picks out their clothes the night before. She dresses them each morning while they're still sleeping. She sometimes slips them a

snack to eat on the bus.

"It's such a long day," said Erlwine, who works in sales at Snowshoe. "They don't want to get up. They're tired all the time."

Becki Furbee's 6-year-old son, Max, will enter the first grade at Marlinton Elementary Monday. Last year, she sometimes received notes from Max's teacher.

Max seems sleepy, the notes said.

"The teachers always tell us the Snowshoe kids are so tired. No wonder," Furbee said. "The little ones say, 'I don't want to go to school tomorrow.' When I was young I loved school."

Counting bolts

Tommy Evans dashed through the spring rain and hopped into his bus for the ride home. He sat in the front seat behind the driver.

The little children always sit near the front, the middle school students in the middle, and high school students, if they don't drive to school, in the back.

Some children open books and try to read or tackle homework, but it's difficult on the bumpy, twisting ride. So boys play hand-held video games, girls practice putting on lipstick.

"If you ride this two times a day, five days a week, man, it gets old real fast," said Seth Morgan, 8, a second-grader at Marlinton Elementary. "As soon as I get home, I eat, drink, do my homework, go to bed. I don't have time for anything else."

Sometimes children urinate in their pants on the bus. Sometimes they vomit.

"If they start to get sick, we know to get the trash can," Seth

said.

Around him, children used their fingers to scribble messages on fogged windows. They typed "7734" into a calculator, then flipped it upside down to spell "hell."

The older children played "truth or dare," the younger ones, "bubble gum, bubble gum, in a dish." There were games of "mercy" and "scissors, paper, rock."

"The first person to bleed is out," said Hanna Giddings, 12, a sixth-grader at Marlinton Middle.

They also counted bolts.

They counted the bolts along a seam that seals two sections of the bus roof.

"Everyone on the bus can tell you there are 46 bolts," said Alexa Furbee, 13, Becki Furbee's daughter, who has been on the same grueling bus run since kindergarten.

The bus splashed through Slatyfork, pulled up at a mobile home park. A mother drove up on a lawn tractor to pick up her daughter, rain soaking her clothes.

The bus barreled up Snowshoe Mountain, past the chairlifts and ski slopes and mountain lodge. Tommy's mother was waiting for him. He looked out the window and smiled.

"Hey, hey, I'm almost home," he said.

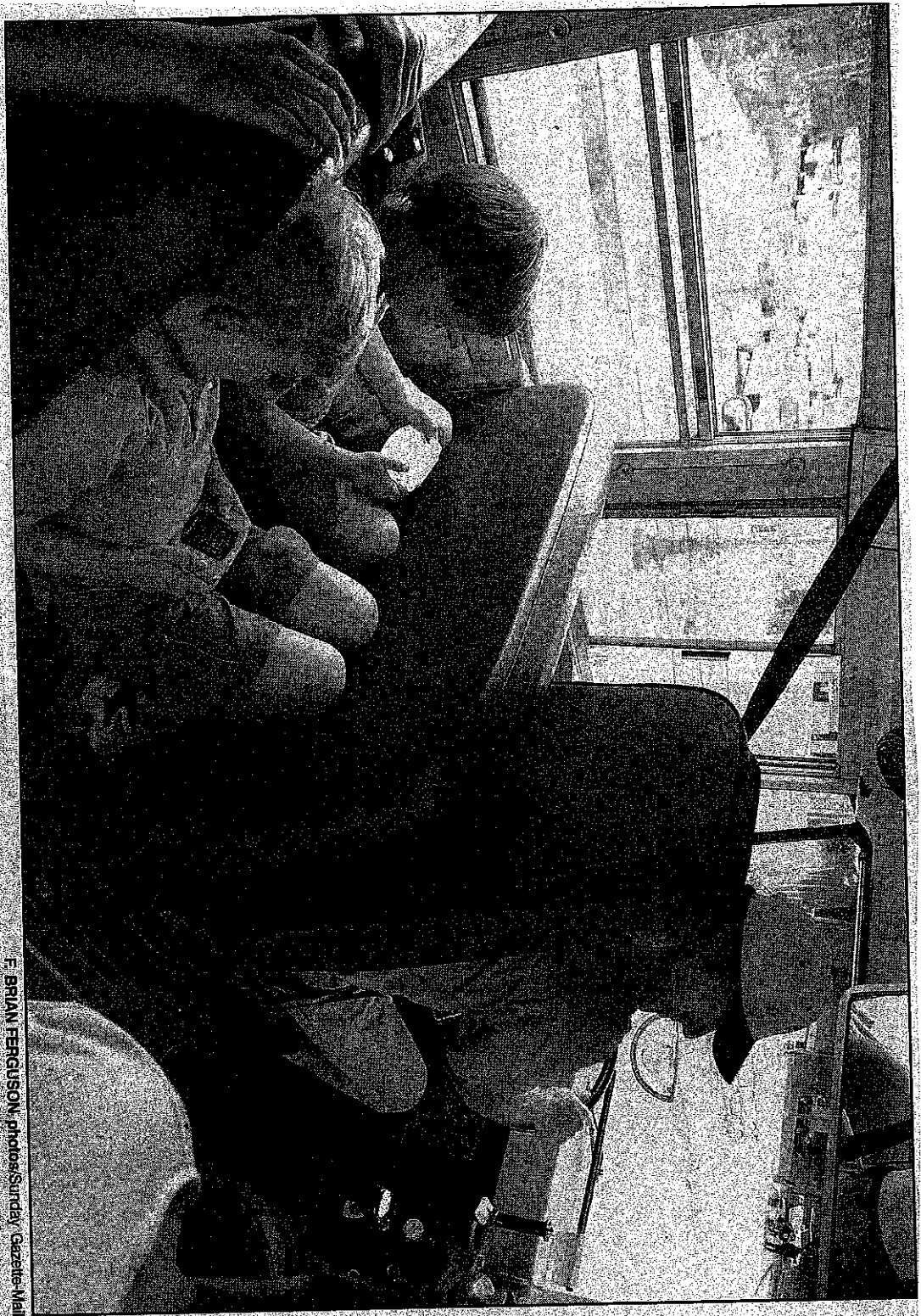
He was asked how long he rides the bus each day.

"It takes about eight hours," he said.

To contact staff writers Eric Eyre and Scott Finn, use e-mail or call 357-4323.

Children play video games to while away the long bus rides in Pocahontas County.

F. BRIAN FERGUSON, photos/Sunday Gazette-Mail



Riding the school bus hazardous to children

Long rides also cause family, social disruption, studies say

By Eric Eyre and Scott Flinn
gazette@wvgazette.com

They're tired and cranky. They have a hard time concentrating in class. They can't join the football team or the band, or take the most difficult classes.

Students, parents and teachers told the Gazette-Mail that long bus rides take a toll on children's health, academics and social lives.

Researchers agree.

Riding a bus may be hazardous to your child's health, according to three studies released in the past year.

▲ A Yale University study found that diesel bus fumes may be to blame for the dramatic rise in childhood asthma in the United States. Students who ride buses breathe five to 15 times more particulate soot than children playing outside.

▲ A National Resource Defense Council-Coalition for Clean Air report concluded that children who ride buses are exposed to diesel exhaust at levels dozens of times higher than levels considered to be a significant cancer risk under Environmental Protection Agency and federal guidelines.

▲ The Union of Concerned Scientists found that schoolchildren in every state were needlessly exposed to toxic air pollutants. Students with the longest rides over many years, and children who sat on buses while they idled, were most at risk.

Every day, thousands of West Virginia students with long rides must wait on idling buses for five to 20 minutes at transfer points.

The buses belch diesel exhaust. The kids breathe it in.

"The issue with children is they are particularly vulnerable," said Patricia Monahan, senior transportation analyst with the Union for Concerned Scientists. "They have young lungs that are still developing. And they breathe at higher rates than adults. For children on more than an hour, it's a significant source of pollution for them."

Children with long bus rides also can suffer from social, family and academic problems, studies found.

"Of the 64 households (interviewed), seven had sought professional help for the psychological problems students developed from riding on a school bus each day," said researcher Michael Fox in a study of Canadian children with long rides.

They have less time for family, homework and a social life, Fox said.

Students also told Fox they've seen drugs, violence and even sex during their bus rides. Parents also complained that their elementary children ride with high school seniors, exposing them to inappropriate behavior.

Elementary children ride with high school students in almost every rural West Virginia county.

Children with long rides are

less likely to get involved in sports, band, and other extracurricular activities, several studies confirm. Students who don't get involved often have lower grades and are more likely to drop out of school.

Students interviewed by the Gazette-Mail said that the long rides hurt their academic performance, but state and national educators have paid scant attention to the issue.

"This field has been taboo for 30 years because the issue was linked with racism and desegregation," said Marty Strange, policy director for the Rural Schools and Community Trust, an advocacy group for rural schools.

West Virginia's long bus rides aren't related to desegregation orders.

The most recent comprehensive study on academic performance looked at 2,000 bused students in Oklahoma in 1973. They found that children on the bus over an hour scored lower than children with shorter rides.

Earlier research is mixed on whether busing hurts students academically. Two other studies from the early 1970s found no difference between bused students and non-bused students. Those studies were criticized for not taking into account the socioeconomic background of the students, which the Oklahoma study did.

To contact staff writers Eric Eyre and Scott Flinn, use e-mail or call 357-4323.

Rising costs, fewer students

By Eric Eyre and Scott Finn
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School transportation costs have soared in West Virginia, nearly doubling during the past decade, even though the state buses 25,000 fewer children.

Gasoline prices have shot up. Liability insurance costs more. Bus driver salaries are rising. And West Virginia school buses are traveling more miles every year.

"At one time you had 25 students on a ridge," said Jay Yeager, transportation director in Wetzel County. "Now there are only three. We have to run the bus on more roads to fill up the buses. If there are only two students on a ridge, we're still required to go up there."

West Virginia spends nearly 7 percent of its education budget on transportation, more than any state in the nation, according to data from School Bus Fleet Magazine. Four counties — Gilmer, Clay, Tyler and Doddridge — spend more than 10 percent of their budgets on busing.

West Virginia ranks 10th in the nation on transportation spending on a per-pupil basis. Gilmer County pays more than \$1,000 per pupil to haul children to school.

"There's virtually no incentive to control costs," said Julio Massad, a consultant who studied West Virginia school transportation in 1998.

Massad recommended numerous ways to control costs, from changes in the state's school funding formula to cutting salaries for bus drivers, who are paid for full-time work when they only work part of the day.

The rising transportation costs have forced counties to slash elsewhere: in classrooms, offices and cafeteria kitchens.

"They don't have enough cooks to cook the meals," said state schools Transportation Director Wayne Clutter, who recommends an overhaul of the state funding formula.

To pay for bus drivers in Pocahontas County, the school board eliminated weekend custodians who clean the schools.

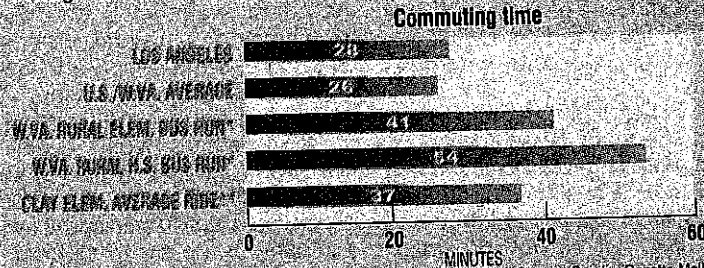
The state's funding formula distributes money based on enrollment, not the number of students who ride buses or the number of miles buses travel.

Last year, state schools Su-

Long rides, tough hides

Pint-sized children, adult-sized drives

Thousands of West Virginia's rural children ride the bus longer than the average commute for a Los Angeles driver.



*Indicates time between first pickup and student drop-off.

**Clay Elem. was one of the few schools where average bus times could be determined.

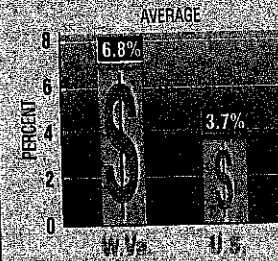
Source: Sunday Gazette-Mail computer analysis, U.S. Census



FACT: The number of children riding the bus two hours or more per day **DOUBLED** during the past decade.

A heavy load

West Virginia spends a higher percentage of its school budget on transportation than any other state.

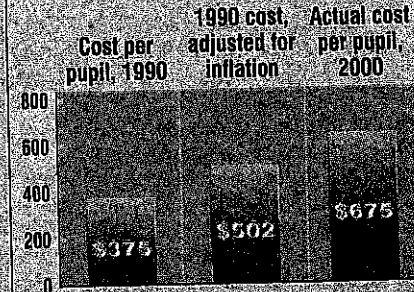


Source: School Bus Fleet Magazine

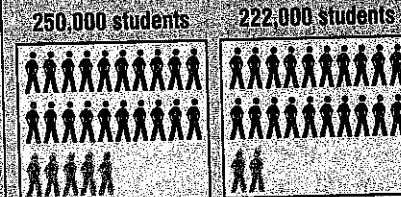
Soaring costs, fewer kids

From 1990 to 2000 in West Virginia...

The cost of transportation per pupil has increased by 80% — more than twice the rate of inflation.



Fewer students are riding the bus.



Each figure represents 10,000 students

...while the number of miles driven has increased.



Source: W.Va. Dep. of Ed.

ALETHIA L. STOLLINGS/Sunday Gazette-Mail

perintendent David Stewart recommended that legislators allocate \$3.6 million to hire 119 additional bus drivers. Legislators rejected the request.

West Virginia has taken at least one step to curb costs since

1998: School buses are now retired after 12 years of service instead of 10. The change saves the state \$2.3 million a year.

To contact staff writers Eric Eyre and Scott Finn, use e-mail or call 567-4323.



The end of the day for one student in Pocahontas County.

More than half of all bus runs and two-thirds of bus runs carrying elementary children are longer than state guidelines allow, according to a Sunday Gazette-Mail computer analysis of more than 1,500 bus records in 35 rural counties.

State guidelines recommend elementary children ride the bus no longer than 30 minutes, middle school students 45 minutes, and high schoolers 60 minutes, each way.

County	Percent of bus runs over guidelines				Average bus run			Number of high schools
	All runs	Elementary	Middle school	High school	Elementary school	Middle school	High school	
Barbour	53%	78%	68%	17%	44	47	48	1
Boone	20	43	15	0	28	35	34	3
Braxton	76	72	88	69	44	64	66	1
Calhoun	75	81	84	58	51	63	63	1
Clay	72	97	75	38	58	65	58	1
Doddridge	84	85	86	80	61	65	77	1
Fayette	28	45	24	7	30	32	35	7
Gilmer	95	85	100	100	60	84	84	1
Grant	41	62	48	11	35	42	42	2
Greenbrier	60	60	69	49	38	55	59	2
Hampshire	68	57	68	44	42	50	54	1
Hardy	96	100	93	96	64	59	63	2
Jackson	62	74	77	32	42	59	52	2
Lewis	85	96	92	64	52	65	65	1
Lincoln	50	77	51	20	45	47	47	4
Mason	50	57	62	30	35	48	48	3
McDowell	25	34	24	13	27	33	42	9
Monroe	70	88	62	59	49	49	68	1
Morgan	53	66	57	30	39	48	50	2
Nicholas	43	44	61	23	29	46	48	2
Pendleton	95	96	95	95	66	66	66	1
Pleasants	58	94	69	13	49	53	48	1
Pocahontas	89	90	80	100	55	61	78	1
Preston	69	68	62	78	42	48	72	1
Randolph	39	65	37	14	35	40	40	4
Ritchie	60	60	68	54	36	55	55	1
Roane	65	90	58	49	53	50	59	1
Summers	70	78	80	50	44	57	61	1
Tucker	56	65	35	67	44	44	64	1
Tyler	60	78	71	32	48	53	53	1
Upshur	57	63	66	40	36	52	54	1
Webster	68	71	43	58	40	40	68	1
Weitzel	63	78	60	51	50	60	50	4
Wirt	59	82	77	13	48	49	51	1
Wyoming	46	60	55	19	35	46	46	3

How we did it

The Sunday Gazette-Mail conducted a year-long investigation into the burden that school closings can place on the state's rural children. Today's stories are part one of an ongoing series.

For today's stories, more than 80 people were interviewed and thousands of pages of school closing documents, bus schedules and internal education department records were reviewed.

The Gazette-Mail also tried to answer the question, "Just how long are kids on the bus?"

But no state or county agency kept track of the time children spend riding buses.

School districts in other states, such as Charlotte-Mecklenburg in North Carolina, keep computerized bus records. The Charlotte Observer used that data to determine the average bus ride for area students.

In West Virginia, each county school system keeps those records differently. Many rural districts still keep handwritten bus logs. Others keep records in a computer word processing format. A few use a database program.

Most keep only records of bus runs — when they start and when they end — but not on when each individual child is picked up by the

bus.

Through the Freedom of Information Act, the Gazette-Mail obtained records for 1,569 bus runs for the state's 35 most rural counties. (Those counties were considered for federal school construction funds because they were the most sparsely populated in the state.)

Over the course of nine months, the newspaper constructed a database including when each run started, when it stopped, and how much time children rode in-between.

The bus runs represent the longest possible time a child might ride a bus. The run began when the first person stepped on the bus, and ended when the children were dropped off at an elementary, middle or high school.

Average bus times for most counties could not be tabulated, because most don't track when individual children board their bus.

Clay County is one of the few that tracks exactly when each child boards the bus and when they are dropped off. Because of this, the Gazette-Mail was able to determine that the average Clay Elementary student spent 37 minutes on the bus, more than the state guideline of 30 minutes. The average middle school student was on the bus for 34 minutes, the average high school student

for 38.

The newspaper checked its results with transportation directors in all 35 counties, and made corrections to the database based on their responses.

The bus run times do not include the time children stand waiting for the bus to arrive or transfer time between buses. They are ideal times, not taking into account the days when bad weather or traffic make the runs longer.

For purposes of these stories, junior high schools were classified as middle schools. Buses for special education students, who often ride much longer than other students, were excluded from the database.

The Gazette-Mail also relied upon two surveys of county school transportation directors, one in 1992 and the most recent in 1996.

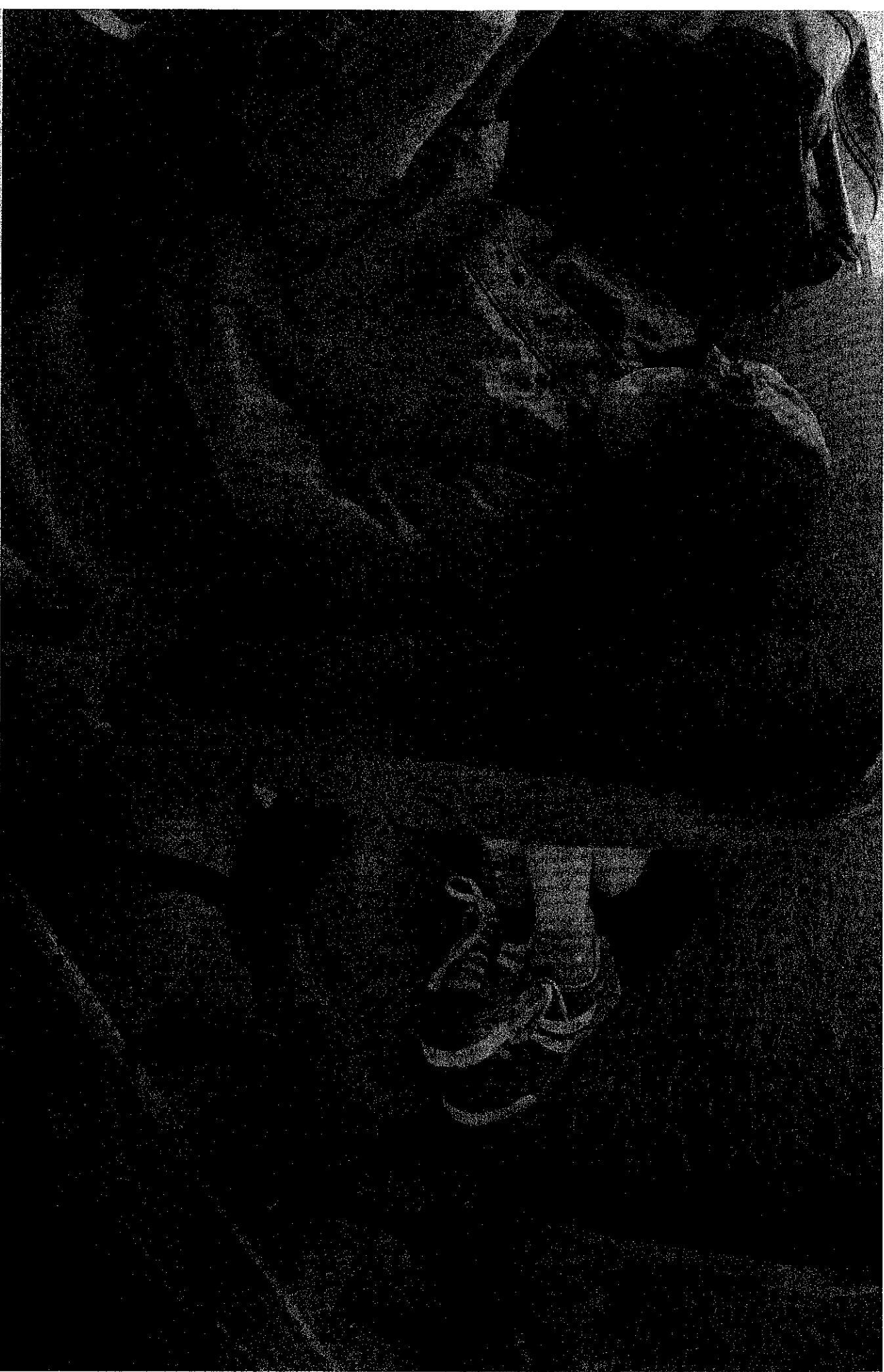
Those surveys are imperfect, because they rely upon the impressions of the directors and not hard data. If anything, they tend to underestimate the amount of time children spend on the bus.

■ ■ ■

Eric Eyre is the recipient of a six-month Journalism Fellowship in Child and Family Policy, which has supported research for this report. The fellowships program is based at the University of Maryland.

o 21 in Pocahontas County try to sleep during their one hour and 40-minute ride.

E. BRIAN FERGUSON photos Sunday Gazette





a Williams, 7, rides a school bus more than two hours a day from Snowshoe Mountain to Marlinton and back. Ways to pass the time include experimenting with
-up. Long bus rides can damage children's health and harm their academic performance, experts say.

Broken Promises

After rural school closings: more administrators, scant savings and advanced courses cut

STORIES BY ERIC EYRE AND SCOTT FINN ♦ PHOTOGRAPHS BY F. BRIAN FERGUSON

SCHOOL administrators across West Virginia have reneged on promises to provide students with advanced classes and save taxpayers millions of dollars through school closings and personnel cuts, an investigation by the Sunday Gazette-Mail has found.

Instead, administrators bolstered their ranks over the past decade, even though school boards shut down more than 300 schools, and 41,000 fewer students now attend West Virginia schools.

"That's an embarrassing revelation," said Marty Strange of the Rural Schools and Community Trust. "That's bad news for West Virginia's children."

The Gazette-Mail's examination of school closing documents, personnel data and high school class schedules showed:

▲ Despite a 13 percent drop

in student enrollment, seven more school administrators (principals, superintendents, etc.) work in West Virginia than a decade ago. Central office administrators (those who don't work directly with children) increased by 16 percent.

State schools Superintendent David Stewart said the increase in school administrators statewide was beyond his control. The state school funding formula pays for fewer administrators every year.

But county school boards have used local and federal funds to hire more administrators, according to state personnel data.

▲ State and county officials failed to track any savings after closing hundreds of schools. In 1993, the state School Building Authority began a study on consolidation savings but aborted it.

Contrary to what he's said in



School consolidation in West Virginia

the past, state School Building Authority Executive Director Clacy Williams acknowledged earlier this month that school closings didn't save taxpayers money.

County administrators spent the money to add more classes and improve educational programs instead, he said.

"If we can't improve the education of youngsters, then I don't care if we save a nickel,"

Williams said.

▲ To entice parents and students to accept school closings, school officials promised advanced foreign language, science and math classes. But officials in rural counties have eliminated many of those courses because student enrollment has plummeted, state funding has dropped, and they can't find qualified teachers.

In Wayne County, school administrators promised rigorous Advanced Placement Courses in 12 subjects when three high schools merged into Spring Valley High. Today, the 1,100-student high school offers no AP classes.

In Roane County, school officials promised to provide four levels of Spanish and three levels of German when they closed Spencer and Walton high schools in 1993. Today, consolidated

Roane County High offers just two levels of Spanish. (When they were open, Spencer and Walton high schools provided three levels of Spanish plus German.)

And in Pendleton County, administrators promised zoology, calculus, Japanese and 22 other advanced classes to students from the former Franklin and Circleville high schools. Only one of those classes, drama, is being offered this year.

"There were wild promises. We knew it was pie in the sky," said Bob Bastress, a West Virginia University law professor who represented Circleville residents in their unsuccessful consolidation battle in the 1990s.

Williams said rural school districts would be in even worse shape if they hadn't closed schools.

"Just think of the situation

they would be in if they still had those small schools," he said. "At this juncture, they wouldn't even be able to offer the core curriculum. They're still way ahead of the game."

Aborted study on savings

When the state School Building Authority opened its doors in 1989, school leaders predicted the agency would save taxpayers tens of millions of dollars.

The SBA would give counties money to build schools, provided they met "economies of scale" — size requirements that encouraged school consolidation.

Counties quickly lined up for the school construction cash. In school closing documents, they promised to cut administrators and teachers, and pump the sav-

*Please See **BROKEN**, Page 6C*

BROKEN

Continued From Page 1C

ings into classrooms.

By 1991, then-Gov. Gaston Caperton declared the school closings saved the state \$47 million a year on maintenance and personnel alone.

But 11 years and more than \$1 billion in new school construction later, no one at the state Department of Education, School Building Authority or state Legislature has checked whether the predicted savings materialized.

The SBA started a review in the early 1990s, but halted it.

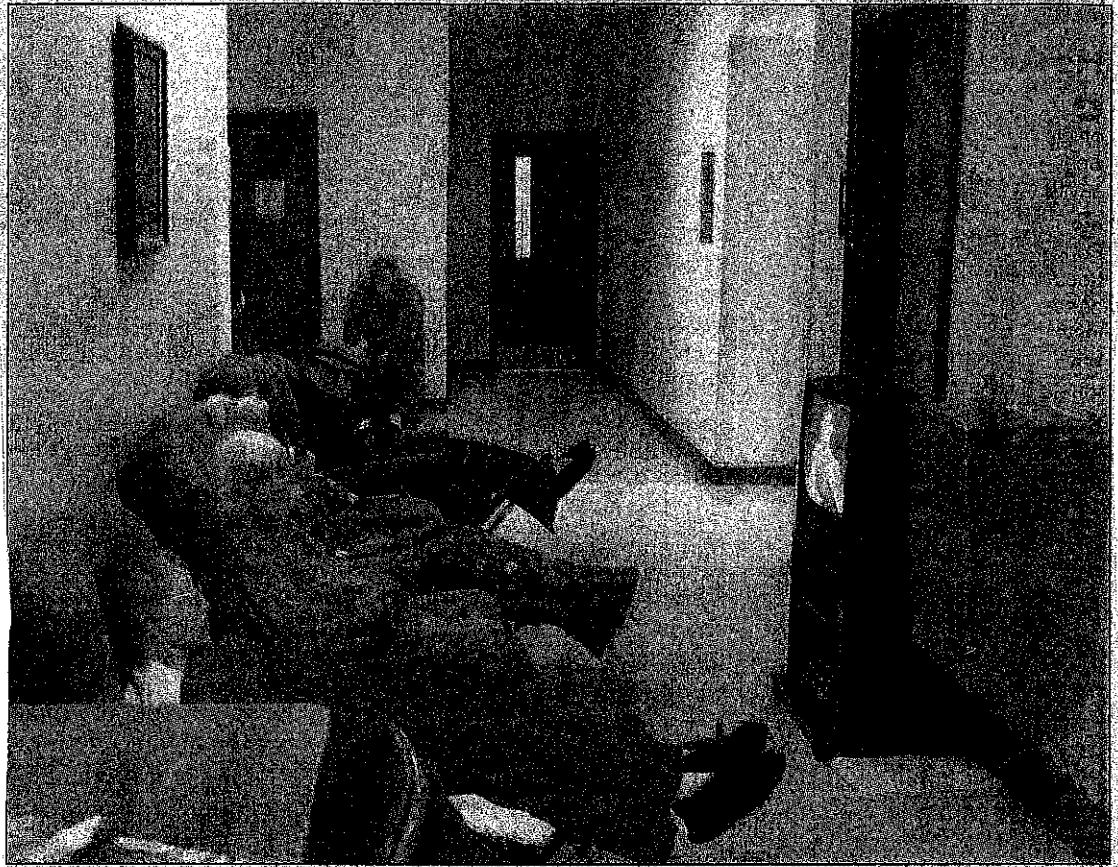
"We just haven't had time to do that work," Williams said during a 1997 court deposition. "We've got 63 construction projects on our plate right now. . . . There's only so much you can get done."

The SBA never resumed the study. County school officials wouldn't cooperate, Williams said earlier this month.

"The superintendents didn't get the information to me," he said. "I didn't push it. I just dropped it."

The SBA has no records from the aborted study, Williams said.

The agency doesn't plan to examine the issue anytime soon because of the "extreme difficulty and complexity of attempting such a study," he wrote in response to a Freedom of Information Act request from the Gazette-Mail.



Senior citizens watch television in the hallways of the old Walton High School, which is now the Walton Inn Care Home. County officials said the school building had several safety problems when they closed it nine years ago.



Circleville residents recently replaced the pictures of each graduating class between 1929 (when the first school opened) and 1998, when the last class graduated. Residents think the building could have been renovated instead of closed; school officials called it a fire-trap.

Job cuts slower than student decline

For the past five years, state Department of Education officials have presented a budget report to legislators, claiming a sharp decline in administrators statewide.

The savings from school closings are used to improve "other aspects of school operations and services," he wrote. "To believe that efficiencies equal cash-in-hand is to be uninformed."

The state Department of Education also hasn't tracked the savings promised by county school officials over the past decade.

The department reviews county school closing documents, and the state Board of Education approves them.

The department shreds the closure documents and other records after three years.

Meanwhile, West Virginia education spending grew faster than most states in the 1990s, despite the massive consolidation drive.

The Mountain State's per-pupil spending exceeded the national average for the first time in 1994.

They passed out a chart labeled, "Administrators employed," which shows a 25 percent drop in administrators since 1987.

In fact, more school administrators work in West Virginia today than in 1990.

The officials' report left out administrators paid by county school boards, regional state schools agencies and the federal government. It only in-

cluded administrators funded by the state aid formula.

The chart was mislabeled, acknowledged Mike McKown, executive director of the Department of Education's Office of Internal Operations.

"We don't want to mislead anyone," McKown said. "There will be a different title next year."

As the state cut personnel funding, counties turned to local taxpayers and outside sources to pay for administrators, teachers

and service workers.

They didn't cut as many employees as promised. Their cuts didn't keep pace with the loss of students.

The state employs about 2,000 fewer teachers and service workers than a decade ago, but school boards would have to cut 3,000 more employees just to keep costs from rising. Personnel costs make up 80 percent of spending statewide.

In Pendleton County, the school board promised to cut 10 school employee jobs and save \$200,000 a year before closing

Circleville School four years ago.

The county has cut only three employees since then. And they've added a half-time administrator. Two hundred fewer students attend Pendleton schools.

"Did closing Circleville save money? I don't think so," said Ken Price, Pendleton County schools superintendent. "That's what we preached, but I don't think it's true."

Some state and county school administrators say an

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BROKEN

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increase in special education students prevented them from eliminating more teachers. But special education teachers have declined by 9 percent during the past decade.

School boards also promised to save some money on maintenance and utility costs with fewer schools.

Counties statewide now spend a higher percentage of their budgets on maintenance and utilities than five years ago, even after closing schools.

Advanced courses eliminated

In the years shortly after it first opened, Roane County High School students could take Advanced Placement classes in biology, calculus and chemistry. They had four levels of Spanish

to choose from, three levels of German.

No longer.

The German teacher departed five years ago and was never replaced.

Last year, the school struggled to provide Spanish and wound up holding an on-line "interactive Spanish" class for students. A vocational teacher served as proctor. The course re-

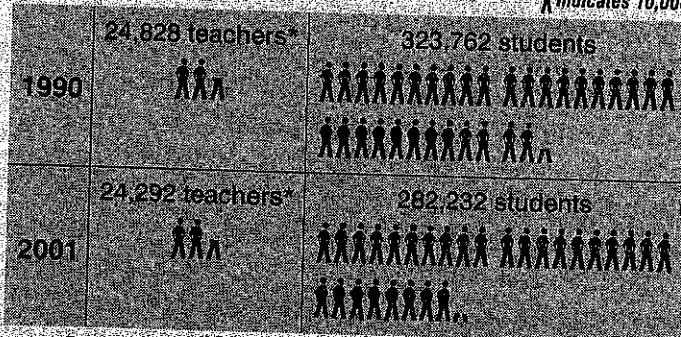
Saving money?

Despite promises that closing schools would cut costs, West Virginians are spending more than ever on education.

Student numbers fall; teachers stay the same

During the '90s, the number of students dropped 13 percent, while the number of teachers dropped only 2 percent.

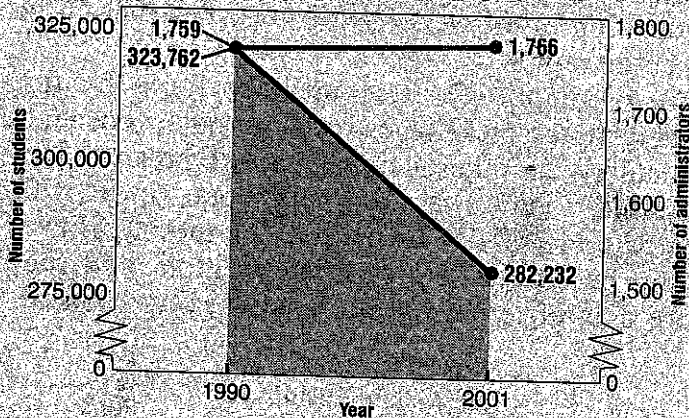
▲ Indicates 10,000



*Includes teachers and other professionals, not service personnel.

More administrators, fewer students

There were seven additional school administrators in West Virginia in 2001 compared to 1990, even though the state lost 41,000 students.

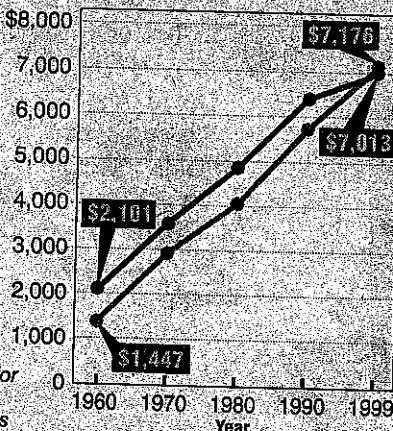


Average spending per pupil, 1960-1999*

West Virginia spends more per pupil than the national average. The state's spending rose faster than the national average in the 1990s, despite hundreds of school closings.



*Adjusted for inflation in 1999 dollars



Sources: U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, Digest of Educational Statistics 2001; West Virginia Report Card, West Virginia Department of Education

ALETHIA L. STOLLINGS/Sunday Gazette-Mail

ceived bad reviews, said Assistant Superintendent Joe Painter.

This fall, the high school offered two levels of Spanish after two teachers were hired.

And the AP courses? Gone. "Students here don't want AP classes," Painter said.

"That's a darn tough test to pass."

Roane County isn't the only high school in West Virginia that has eliminated advanced classes that were promised when schools consolidated.

The Gazette-Mail examined high school consolidation documents and course schedules in 10 counties and found more than 100 advanced classes that were promised but weren't offered in the past two years.

AP and advanced foreign languages were routinely scratched from high school schedules.

County administrators said they can't afford to offer such courses. Student enrollment and state funding have dropped. They can't find qualified teachers.

"It's a matter of priorities and where the demand is," Painter said.

"We're adjusting our personnel to the needs of kids."

Administrators didn't promise the advanced courses "in perpetuity," said state schools Deputy Superintendent Bill Luff. Pendleton County's closing documents, for instance, list the advanced courses as "possible."

Mineral, Wyoming and Cabell

counties were the exceptions. Those counties delivered more courses than promised after closing high schools.

Some counties, such as Wayne and Roane, eliminated AP classes, and replaced them with dual-credit courses that enable students to obtain high school and West Virginia college credits at the same time.

State school leaders want to reverse that trend.

They want more students in AP classes. They say AP classes are more rigorous. Students who pass a test at the end of an AP course can receive credits from colleges throughout the nation.

Statewide, the percentage of high school seniors who took at least one AP exam increased slightly during the past six years, from 6 percent to 6.5 percent.

Less than half of West Virginia students who took an AP course passed the exam last year, down from 56 percent in 1997.

"Has the increase been what I expected? No," Stewart said.

The superintendent and other state education leaders plan to prod counties to offer the advanced classes.

"It may relate to the leadership the superintendent brings to the county," said state school board member Sandra Chapman. "I'd like to think it still could be done."

To contact staff writers Eric Eyre and Scott Finn, use e-mail or call 357-4323.



F. BRIAN FERGUSON photos/Sunday Gazette-Mail

Peruvian native Cecilia Townsend leads a Spanish class recently at Roane County High School. For much of the summer, administrators couldn't find a foreign language teacher, until they heard Townsend moved to the area with her husband.

1923

1993

The gymnasium at the former Walton High School now hosts dances for the retirement home that's taken over the facility. Roane County's two high schools were closed in 1993 and replaced with a consolidated high school.

Pendleton school could have been fixed up,

some say

CIRCLEVILLE — This is how a tiny mountain town ended up with three gymnasiums and three public kitchens within 50 yards of each other all in the name of saving money.

Twelve years ago, county school officials said they had to close historic Circleville K-12 School to cut costs.

It's a relic from the 1930s, they said. It's expensive to maintain and doesn't meet the needs of children anymore.

Besides, the state School Building Authority wouldn't give the county money unless it consolidated schools, they said.

After a bitter court battle, they closed Circleville in 1998. They built a new elementary nearby — close enough that a sixth-grader could throw a baseball and hit their old school.

They sent the junior and senior high students to Franklin, after building an addition and renovating the high school there.

Cost: \$9.2 million, paid almost

entirely by the state School Building Authority.

While they were building the new elementary school, they ran short of money. They had to cut the size of the gymnasium in half.

"No fair," local parents cried. They had been promised a full-sized gym.

They turned to their state representative, who happens to be Finance Committee chairman of the House of Delegates.

He found state money to build the kitchen and gymnasium that now bears his name, the Harold K. Michael Community Building. It stands between the old school and the new one.

Cost: more than \$600,000 from the state Budget Digest.

Meanwhile, community volunteers like Dot Bennett worked to bring the old school back to its former glory. Earlier this month, she showed visitors the results.

They polished the wooden gym floors and painted the old bleachers gleaming white and



Dot Bennett fought to keep Circleville School open in the late 1990s, but the state Supreme Court turned down the community's lawsuit. "It's a dirty dog shame they closed it," she says.

green, and installed new kitchen equipment in the old home economics room. With some additional work, the building soon will meet all fire and safety codes, Bennett said. Cost: about \$200,000, from grants, local fund-raisers and

state funds.

"They said it would cost millions to fix this building," Bennett said. She waved her hand at the gymnasium ceiling, at the new lights and paint. "Look what we've been able to do with so little."

Twelve years ago, county officials estimated it would cost \$6.6 million to build a new Circleville School.

They never estimated how much it would cost to renovate the old building, which is on the National Register of Historic Places.

"That's outrageous not to even explore all of the options," said Constance Beaumont of the National Trust of Historic Places. "It's heartbreaking, as well as wasteful."

Other states have discovered they can save millions through renovations and still give students a modern school, she said.

During the closure debate, Clacy Williams, executive director of the state School Building Au-

thority, said the building was a firetrap. You could start a fire by dropping a match on its wooden floors, he said.

Jerry Myers, a school architect in Idaho, has renovated several schools with wooden floors and met fire codes. Even replacing the floors could be cheaper than building something new, he said.

Bennett isn't a construction expert. But she's convinced that county officials were so determined to close Circleville, they didn't want to ask if renovation was possible.

"If we could've gotten the money they've spent on these other buildings, we would've had the Taj Mahal here," she said.

"It's a shame it had to happen. If they had any sense, it wouldn't have," she said.

No savings, few new classes

In the last decade, Pendleton County school officials closed one high school and two ele-

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mentary schools. The survival of the school system depended on consolidation, they said, to cut costs and improve curriculum for students.

But predictions of big savings have failed to come true.

They've cut only three staff members, when they promised to cut 10.

Meanwhile, student enrollment has dropped by almost 200 students, the equivalent of four loaded school buses.

County officials are trying to explain the falling enrollment. Hanover Shoe, the county's biggest employer, shut its doors two years ago.

Also, about 70 North Fork Valley students who would have attended Circleville drive or take a bus to schools in other counties, such as Petersburg High in Grant County.

To keep up with the student decline, Superintendent Ken Price should have laid off 20 more staff members.

The school board can't fire anyone else, he said. The bus still has to run to the

end of the hollow, even if it only picks up one child. The new North Fork Elementary still needs two cooks, even though it has 100 fewer students than the old Circleville K-12.

School officials also promised to cut maintenance and utilities spending in half after the consolidation.

Instead, the county spends a higher percent of its budget on operational costs.

The new buildings have modern heat and air conditioning, which cost more to maintain, Price said.

The promised world-class curriculum never materialized, either.

In one document, school officials promised to provide 25 new advanced courses in the new high school, including Latin, Japanese, and science courses from astronomy to zoology.

This year, the high school offers only one of those courses — drama. The school has no Advanced Placement classes, despite promises to offer five.

Soon after the consolidation, some Pendleton High students took Latin and Japanese through satellite classes. Those same classes would have been available at Circleville, which had one of the state's first satellite classrooms.

Earlier this month, the new Pendleton High principal, Doug Lambert, looked at the promised

list of courses. He shook his head and laughed.

"This is a pretty aggressive schedule," he said. "I'd be surprised if any high school in the state offered all this."

The North Fork Express

Many of Circleville's parents and students didn't give up when their school closed in 1998.

Instead, they seceded.

On a recent summer morning, Dot Bennett's husband, Fay, fired up the North Fork Express.

"Bus No. 1929" is painted on the side — that's the year local volunteers built the first Circleville School with their own hands.

Fay Bennett followed the North Fork River downstream and picked up 30 students on the way to Petersburg.

It's almost unheard of in West Virginia for students to cross county lines to attend school. But the state makes an exception for students here, because they are so isolated.

Parents pay \$20 a month, but that doesn't pay all the bills. The Bennetts spend some of their own money to keep the bus running.

"This is a non-profit venture, very nonprofit," Dot Bennett said.

Fay Bennett's drive to Petersburg takes almost as long as the ride to Franklin, where students normally would attend Pendleton County High School.

But there's one big difference — the 3,592-foot North Fork Mountain stands between North Fork and Franklin.

On the North Fork Express, the windows may rattle, Fay Bennett said, and the 1986 International only gets nine miles per gallon. But it doesn't have to drive over that mountain every day.

"This old bus is slow, but we've only got two little hills and don't need to go fast," he said.

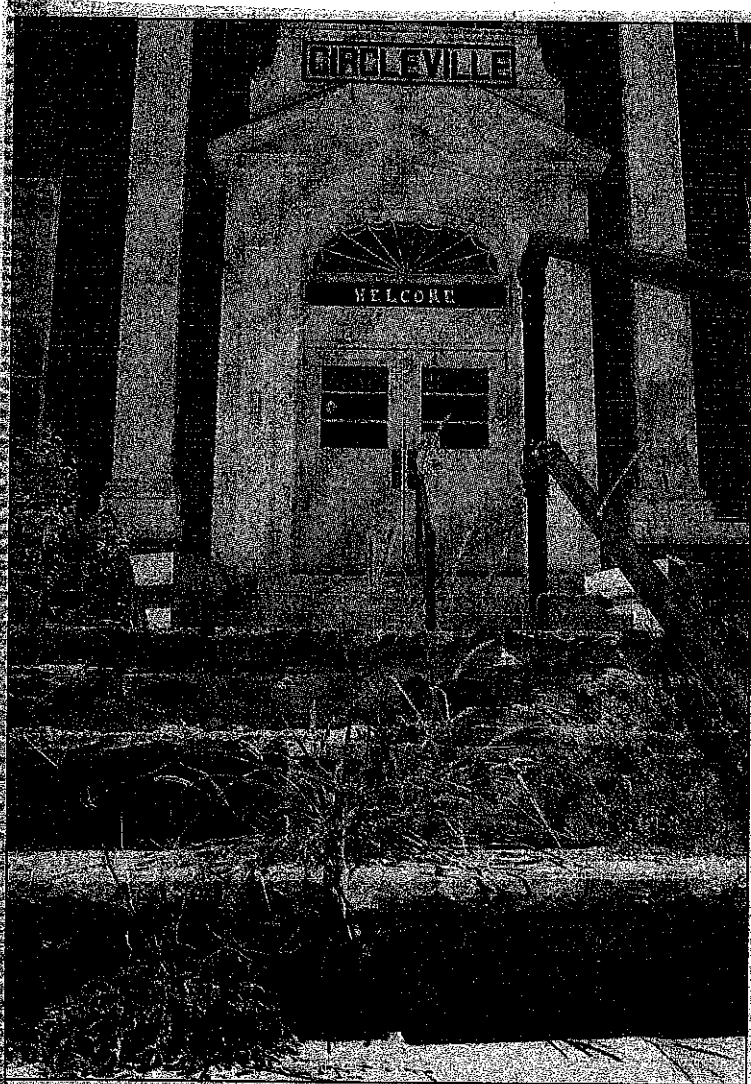
Last January on that mountain, a tractor-trailer slid on a patch of ice and careened toward a Pendleton County school bus full of North Fork children.

The bus driver swerved up an embankment and avoided a head-on collision. But several children were seriously hurt. One girl is still recovering at home.

Ashley Bennett, 18, rode that bus on the day it wrecked. (Ashley is no relation to Fay and Dot Bennett.)

"They promised if the roads were bad, we wouldn't go over the mountain. Well, they've gone over on days when the buses were sliding backward with

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Weeds now sprout from the front step of Circleville School, built by local residents in 1935. The building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and local volunteers are renovating the inside as a community center and business incubator.

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chains in the snow," she said. "It's been so bad, you couldn't tell if you were on the road or off the road."

School officials also promised that North Fork students wouldn't ride the bus more than 15 to 25 additional minutes a day.

But in good weather, buses take half an hour to drive the 17 miles from Circleville to Franklin. The average Pendleton County bus run is longer than an hour, according to county bus logs.

And elementary school students have to wait for the high school students before they can go home. They arrive at North Fork Elementary at least half an hour early and leave at least half an hour after school ends.

County officials once said they'd be able to drive the elementary children home separately, shortening their bus rides.

Amy Harper, 15, of Seneca Rocks decided to ride the North Fork Express. She likes Petersburg; she's treated well there.

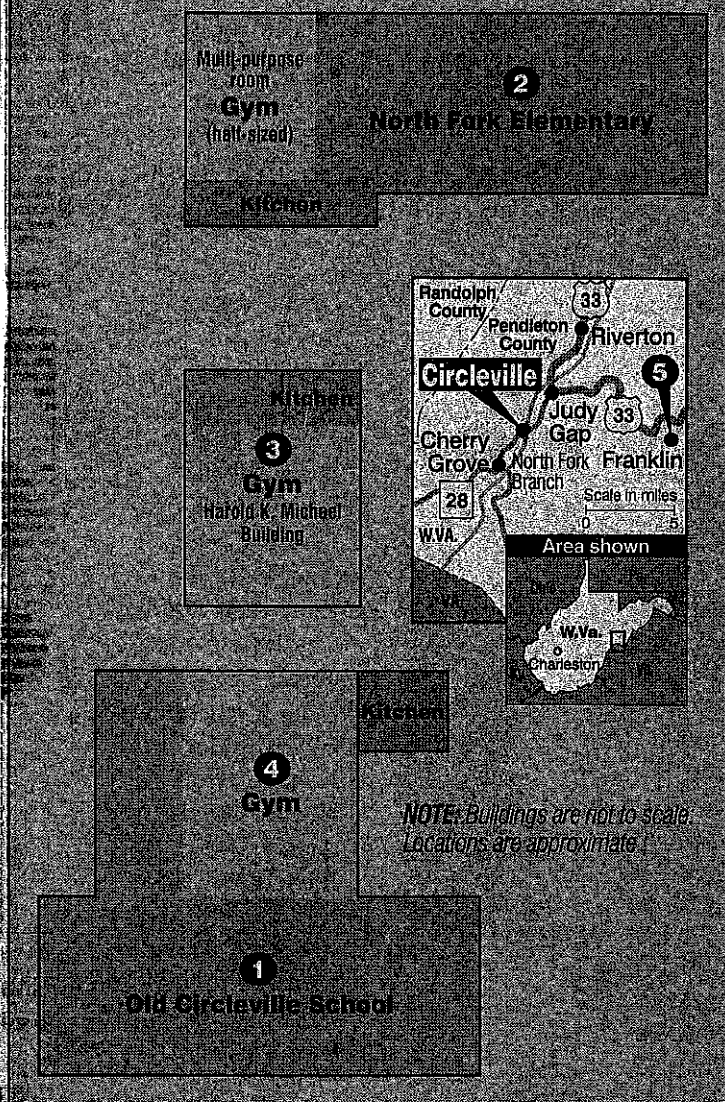
But the bus ride is still long, and she has time to participate in only one extracurricular activity, Future Farmers of America.

If Circleville were still open, Harper says she might have tried out for the basketball team, or the cheerleading squad. She might have helped teach first-graders how to read.

"I'd love to have Circleville back," she said. "You knew everybody. It was like family. We'd all like to be back at Circleville."

To contact staff writers Eric Eyre and Scott Finn, use e-mail or call 357-4323.

Three gymnasiums, no waiting



How tiny Circleville got three gyms, kitchens

1 Pendleton County school officials closed Circleville K-12 School in 1998, with promises of saving money.

2 They built the new K-6 North Fork Elementary for \$2.2 million. Local parents cried foul when they constructed a "multi-purpose room" instead of a full-sized gymnasium.

3 Their state delegate, House Finance Committee Chair Harold K. Michael, obtained more than \$600,000 to build a gymnasium and kitchen between the old school and new one.

4 Local volunteers are renovating the 1935 Circleville School, including the gymnasium, all for about \$200,000. They expect to finish the kitchen in time for an all-school reunion next summer.

5 In Franklin, the state School Building Authority spent \$7 million to renovate and build an addition to the existing high school, where Circleville's junior and senior high students were sent. Total cost to shut down Circleville School: \$10 million.

Source: Circleville residents Dot Bennett, Robert Phares

ALETHIA L. STOLLINGS/Sunday Gazette-Mail

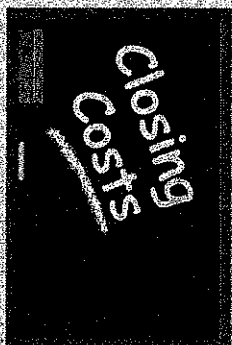
Consolidating elementary schools a hard sell

By Scott Finn and Eric Eyre
gazette@wvgazette.com

WHEN they closed high schools, county officials promised new advanced courses and more extracurricular activities for their students.

They had less to offer elementary students whose schools faced the consolidation ax.

New computer labs, in some cases, fewer split-grade classrooms. Art, music, gym and special education teachers who worked exclusively in the schools. Full-time librarians. Full-time counselors.



School consolidation in West Virginia

"It enhances services, but you can't say it enhances it like at a secondary school," said Leonard Allen, an assistant superintendent in Kanawha County, where more than a dozen elementary schools

have closed in the past three years.

In the last decade, more than two-thirds of all school closings involved elementary schools.

Elementary schools are targeted for consolidation even more in the next eight years. Four of every five schools scheduled to close, 110 schools, serve elementary students.

Young children lose more than they gain in most school consolidations, said Doris Williams, a researcher with the Rural School and Community Trust.

Long bus rides hurt elementary children the most, she said. They make them tired and steal

valuable learning time.

More than two-thirds of bus runs carrying elementary students are too long to meet state guidelines of 30 minutes each way, according to a Gazette-Mail analysis of bus logs in 35 rural West Virginia counties.

Also, younger students need their parents to be involved in their education even more than older students, she said.

But low-income parents are less likely to stay involved in a consolidated school, Williams said.

For example, they might be able to find a ride to their community school, but can't make it

to the consolidated school in the county seat.

Consolidation supporters point to the drop in split-grade classes, from 220 to 116 in the last five years.

(Split-grade classrooms include students from more than one grade level.)

Also, the state employs 5 percent more librarians, 36 percent more nurses and 21 percent more counselors now than a decade ago — many of those serving elementary students.

Elementary principals have demanded counselors as more young students disrupt classes, report abuse and complain

they're stressed and anxious.

Last year, Kanawha County principals listed an increase in counselors as their top priority, even more important than salary hikes.

Williams applauds administrators for hiring more counselors. But she said those counselors could have traveled between smaller schools instead of sending the children on long bus rides.

"Who gets to travel, the counselor or the kids? Who is it hurting or not?" she asked.

To contact staff writers Scott Finn and Eric Eyre, use e-mail or call 357-4323.